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Desmond Hunter

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Renaissance Keyboard Fingering

The Implications of Fingering Indications in Virginalist Sources: Some Thoughts for Further Study*

Desmond Hunter

The fingering of virginalist music has been discussed at length by various scholars.¹ The topic has not been exhausted however; indeed, the views expressed and the conclusions drawn have all too frequently been based on limited evidence. I would like to offer some observations based on both a knowledge of the sources and the experience gained from applying the source fingerings in performances of the music. I propose to focus on two related aspects: the fingering of linear figuration and the fingering of graced notes.

Our knowledge of English keyboard fingering is drawn from the information contained in virginalist sources. Fingerings scattered

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¹ See in particular Julane Rodgers, *Early Keyboard Fingering ca. 1520-1620* (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1971), pp. 116ff and Peter Le Huray, "English Keyboard Fingering in the 16th and Early 17th Centuries," *Source Materials and the Interpretation of Music*, ed. Ian Bent (London, 1981), 227ff.

throughout a number of these sources constitute a valuable body of data in that they represent a fingering system in practice. Although the fingerings appear in the main to be contemporary with the music, only those in a few of the sources can be associated with important figures of the period: fingerings in two manuscripts which were owned by Thomas Tomkins appear to be in the composer's hand,² and it is probable that the indications in *My ladye Nevells booke* derive from William Byrd.

Broadly speaking, the source fingerings fall into two categories: firstly, detailed fingering which undoubtedly served an instructional purpose; secondly, skeletal fingering which served as a guide for the experienced player. An examination of fingerings in the first category yields only a limited amount of information. It is clear nevertheless that the association of paired fingerings with scalar figuration was common; and the logic in this is that each step is negotiated by adjacent fingers. Perhaps the most important point to make in this connection is that clarity in running scales is achieved effortlessly with paired fingerings; possibly this was the main reason for the application. The fundamental nature of this technique is underlined in the implied fingering of the rapid division in the passage quoted as Example 1.³

1. *Salvator Mundi* / Bull

GB-Lbl Add. 31403, fol. 9v

(MB xiv, no. 38, bars 5-6)



It has been suggested by several scholars that there may be a relationship between the application of paired fingerings and the articulation of note-

²*F-Pn* Rés. 1122 and the MS which forms fols. 67-82 of the composite volume, *GB-Mus. Sch. C 93*.

³In all the music examples the composition of staves (Anglo-Dutch format) and the left-hand fingering have been modernised.

groupings.⁴ There is little evidence to support this view; indeed, experience shows that a perfectly legato realisation can be achieved in the execution of both ascending and descending runs using paired fingerings. This execution is facilitated if one follows the advice offered by the Spanish theorist Santa María, who suggests that the hands should be inclined a little towards the running part.⁵ The extract quoted as Example 2a includes ascending and descending runs for both hands, and in performance it is possible to achieve smoothness, evenness, and clarity with the implied, conventional pairings of fingers.⁶ It must be acknowledged that some breaks within static harmonic figuration are inevitable, but if articulation is implied within the active 16th-note lines, it would be difficult to argue that any evidence for it is provided by the fingering.

2a. *Prelude*/Tomkins
F-Pn Rés. 1122, p. 110
 (MB v, no. 3, bars 1-5)



⁴See Howard Ferguson, *Keyboard Interpretation* (London, 1975), 67ff; Alan Brown, "Parthenia: Some Aspects of Notation and Performance," *Consort* 32 (1976), 179; Sheila Lawrence, "Technique - a Key to Interpretation," *Journal of the British Institute of Organ Studies* 6 (1982), 11ff; and Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music*, rev. ed. (London and Boston, 1989), 580ff. For a valuable discussion see Richard Troeger, *Technique and Interpretation on the Harpsichord and Clavichord* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 58ff. Janet A. Wright, in "Problems of Articulation in the Keyboard Music of the English Virginalists," *Musical Opinion* 104 (1980), 13ff, and Robert Parkins, in "Keyboard Fingering in Early Spanish Sources," *Early Music* 11 (1983), 323ff, also offer some useful information.

⁵See *Libro llamado Arte de tañer fantasía* (Valladolid, 1565; facs. Farnborough, 1972), fol. 38v.

⁶This was demonstrated on a harpsichord by the author.

MB: 3 4 3 4 3 4 3 4
orig: 2 3 2 3 2 3
2 4 2 4 2 4 2 4

[4 3 2 3 2 3 2]

[2 3 4 3 4 3 4 3 4 5 4 3 2 1 2 1 2 1 3 2 1 2 1 2]

[2 3 4 3 4]

[5 4 3 2 1 2 2 3 4 3 4 5 4 3 2 1 2 1 3]

2b. *Fortune*/ Byrd
GB-En 9448 (Matchett), fol. 15v.
(MB xxvii, no.6, bar 16)



The pairings indicated in the heavily-fingered pieces were probably the most common, but it is clear from an examination of skeletal indications in other pieces that other pairings were possible and probably applied as appropriate by the experienced player. All of the pairings listed in the following Table can be identified in the sources:

Paired fingerings in scalar figuration

(x = metrically-strong note)

	x x	
(a) RH (asc.)	3434	
	4343	(see ex. 4)
	x x	
(b) RH (desc.)	3232	
	2121	(see ex. 4)
	x x	
(c) LH (asc.)	1212	
	2121	(see ex. 12)
	x x	
(d) LH (desc.)	3434	
	1212	(see ex. 3)

The pairings given on the first line in each section of the Table are those which have been identified as the usual patterns and the association of right-hand third finger and left-hand thumb with metrically-strong notes has been emphasized in scholarly writings. With reference to the other patterns, the additional pairings given under (a) and (c) reverse the roles of the fingers. This is an indication that the association of particular fingers with metrically-strong notes was determined by context—the same point could be made in relation to the additional pairing under (b). Support for the additional pairing listed under (d) is provided in several sources, and a few of the passages are quoted in Example 3. This pairing of left-hand 1 and 2 seems to have been determined occasionally by the presence of accidentals in the line. This would seem to be the case in the passage quoted as Example 3a, where the right-hand fingering also is influenced by accidentals in the line. Perhaps a keyboard player was introduced to various methods of fingering once he had mastered the basic principles which are illustrated in the teaching pieces. It is interesting that the Spanish theorist and composer Correa associates certain fingerings with players "who are no longer beginners."⁷

3a. *Fortune*/ Byrd
Matchett, fol. 16
 (bars 21-22)



⁷Francisco Correa de Arauxo, *Facultad Orgánica* (Alcalá de Henares, 1626) fol. 19v; see also Charles Jacobs, *The Performance Practice of Spanish Renaissance Keyboard Music* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1962), p. 230, fn. 55.



3b. *The Woods so Wild*/ Byrd
GB-Lbl Add. 30485, fol. 67v
(MB xxviii, no. 85, bar 51)



3c. *Hornpipe*/ Byrd
GB-Lbl R.M.24.d.3 (Forster), p.60
(MB xxvii, no.39, bar 161)



The finger crossings implied in the patterns of the above Table are not, to be sure, the only ones indicated in the virginalist sources. In linear figuration for the right hand, 3 or 4 occasionally follows 5 in an ascending line; for the left hand, 4 occasionally follows 5 in a descending line. This freedom in crossing fingers ensures that sudden shifts of hand position are avoided.⁸

In any study of fingering, indications associated with an important figure are of particular interest, such as those in *My ladye Nevells booke*, which appear to derive from Byrd. The fingering in *Nevell* is never elaborate but always informative. In common with other sources that contain skeletal fingerings, often an isolated indication is provided where the logical sequence of fingers is interrupted to prepare the hand for the negotiation of a graced note or a particular note-grouping. In the passage quoted as Example 4, the placing of right-hand 3 on d' (in the middle of bar 102) is designed to prepare the hand for the 16th-note group at the beginning of the following bar. Assuming that the pairing of 3 and 4 is implied in the ascending 16th-note line, right-hand 4 would be placed on the first note of the 16th-note figure at the beginning of bar 103. Note-groupings which revolve around the interval of a third are common; where they are fingered, right-hand 4 tends to be placed on the highest note. It would appear, therefore, that it was the execution of this figure that determined the fingering of the approach in the passage in question, and the fact that the approach involved placing right-hand 4 on the metrically-strong semiquavers is clearly of secondary importance. The placing of right-hand 2 on a' at the beginning of bar 102 would seem to be unnecessary in that the progression from the third at the beginning of the bar would be negotiated by adjacent fingers. The indication represents a departure from the norm in the sense that the more usual fingering in a descending run would place right-hand 3 on the metrically-strong notes. The placing of 2 on a', however, ensures that the 16th-note line would follow the 8th-note third without a break. With reference to the suggested pairing of fingers in the descending 16th-note line, it should be noted that Santa María mentions the use of right-hand 1 and 2

⁸See *Pn* Rés. 1185, p. 111, *Parthenia In-Violata* (US-NYp Drexel 5120), no. 2, *Will Forster's Virginal Book* (GB-Lbl R.M. 24.d.3), fol. 182v, *Lbl* add. 36661, fol. 46v and *Priscilla Bunbury's Virginal Book*, fol. 4.

in descending runs;⁹ and there are passages in other virginalist sources in which crossing 2 over 1 seems to be implied.¹⁰

4. *The March before the Battle*/Byrd
Nevell, fol. 17v
 (MB xxviii, no. 93, bars 102-3)



Skeletal indications in two other pieces included in *Nevell* suggest a similar use of the fingers. In the passage given as Example 5 the suggested fingering of the 8th-note figuration is supported by the conjectured placing of right-hand 3 on the graced note at the beginning of bar 61 and the indication 2 on a' in bar 62. It would seem that the marking on a' was required because 3 would be placed on the preceding 8th-note c". Right-hand 2 is indicated at the beginning of the following half-note groups for the same reason. In the passage quoted as Example 6a a similar approach can be supported for analogous reasons. Here, however, the marking, right-hand 3, was necessitated by the implied fingering on the previous note (right-hand 5). In Example 6b the indication, right-hand 4, on e" (in bar 153), relates to the fingering of the approach: the preceding note would in all probability be taken by right-hand 2. A similar application of fingering is evident in passages recorded in other sources.¹¹

⁹*Arte*, fol. 40v.

¹⁰See *Clement Matchett's Book* (GB-En 9448), fol. 12v and Add. 29996, fol. 196v.

¹¹See Rés. 1185, pp. 84f and *Forster*, fols. 112, 113 and 113v.

5. *Qui Passe*/ Byrd *Nevell*, fol. 10v
(*MB* xxvii, no. 19, bars 59-63)



6a. *Fantasia*/ Byrd
Nevell, fols. 164v-165
(*MB* xxvii, no. 25)

bars 125-6



6b. *Fantasia*/ Byrd
Nevell, fols. 164v-165
(*MB* xxvii, no. 25)

bars 151-3



It has been established that an unbroken ascending or descending line can be executed smoothly and evenly with paired fingerings. It should be stressed that this involves no unnecessary or awkward hand movement. However, where the decoration of a descending line results in broken figuration, as illustrated in Example 7, an articulation between stepwise pairs may be implied, particularly where the falling third in a fast-moving line is negotiated by adjacent fingers. The extract from the *Prelude* by Bull given as Example 7 is a case in point. The passage can be managed easily and executed smoothly, but it seems natural in performance to maintain a compact hand position with the result that the notes in the descending line tend to be articulated in pairs. The beaming should not be viewed as significant. Irregularity in the groupings of notes of the same value is a feature of virginalist notation.¹² One of the copyists who contributed to the compilation of *Benjamin Cosyn's Virginal Book* (GB-Lbl R.M. 23.1.4) tended to avoid beaming 8th-notes and 16th-notes. Presumably this is not indicative of a highly articulated style of playing! In connection with the application in Example 7, altered fingering in the *Prelude* by Tomkins referred to earlier is of some interest (see Example 2a: the right-hand passage at the end of bar 2). The *Musica Britannica* reading of this passage gives what appears to be conventional fingering, paralleling the treatment of the comparable right-hand passage in the *Prelude* by Bull given as Example 7. Tomkins's original fingering involves successive pairings of 2 and 3; but he subsequently altered this to give pairings of 2 and 4. Was Tomkins concerned that using successive pairings of 2 and 3 might result in articulated pairs? This would seem to be a possible explanation for the revised fingering, which seems designed to ensure a legato line. The approach is not unique; similar treatment of broken figuration is implied in the fingering of the passage quoted as Example 2b.

7. *Prelude/ Bull*
GB-Lbl, Add. 31403, fol. 4
(MB xix, no. 117, bars 4-5)



¹²See *Brown* (1976), 177f.

It is possible that an underlying reason for much of the skeletal fingering of linear figuration in the sources is a concern for legato realisation. One striking piece of evidence which adds weight to this view is the apparent indication of finger substitution in a piece recorded in *Priscilla Bunbury's Virginal Book*; the passage in question is given as Example 8. This is the only instance in the virginalist sources of an explicit change of fingers on a held note. It causes particular surprise because the detailed fingering in *Priscilla Bunbury's Book* reflects a conservative approach. One might conjecture therefore that, if the technique was introduced to a keyboard player evidently of only moderate ability, it is probable that it would have been applied by a more experienced player. The point of significance here is that an indication of finger substitution relates inevitably to legato realisation.

8. [untitled]/ Jewett
Bunbury, fol. 8v, bars 14-16



The transmission of fingering indications from the sources to modern editions has not always been achieved without error, and instances in the editions of eccentric application are in the main spurious. Nevertheless, there are some puzzling fingerings and most of them relate to the realisation of graces. The most important grace sign in virginalist music is the double stroke: it appears in virtually every source of English keyboard music surviving from the period from around 1540 until the second half of the seventeenth century. A single stroke is less common and a triple stroke is rare (its application is confined to a very small number of sources).¹³ The single and triple strokes appear to have been used largely as qualifying signs: to isolate and identify forms of embellishment normally associated with the double stroke. It should be noted that neither the single stroke nor the triple stroke is given in a

¹³For an extensive examination of virginalist gracing see Desmond Hunter, *The Application of Grace Signs in the Sources of English Keyboard Music, c. 1530 - c. 1650* (Ph.D. diss. National University of Ireland, 1989).

piece in which the double stroke is not used, and the meanings associated with the different signs almost certainly overlapped. Occasionally it appears that it was necessary to clarify or qualify further the meaning of a grace sign. In the so-called Weelkes manuscript (*GB-Lbl* Add. 30485) additional symbols are given in conjunction with certain double strokes;¹⁴ and in this and other sources qualification seems to have been effected occasionally by adopting positional variation of signs.¹⁵ There is no doubt that fingering was also used occasionally to qualify the meaning of a grace sign. Clearly the placing of right-hand 4 or 5 on a graced note would seem to qualify the meaning of a grace sign in the sense that a lower-note grace is probably implied. Lower-note graces evidently were common: left-hand thumb is frequently indicated on notes graced with the double stroke, and in most instances an undershake seems to be an appropriate form of realisation. What is of greater interest is that occasionally there is a suggestion that a fingering indication on a graced note refers to an auxiliary note in the implied grace and therefore qualifies the meaning of the grace sign in a particular way. In the discussion which follows reference is made to three passages in which this possibility is suggested.

First, a simple piece which is preserved in the hand of the composer, Thomas Tomkins; the opening is given as Example 9. Bearing in mind that the virginalists tended to use adjacent fingers on neighbouring notes, the right-hand fingering at the beginning and the left-hand fingering in bar 2 is somewhat illogical; here melodic steps are accompanied by non-adjacent fingers. The double stroke on the first note in the right-hand part possibly indicates an undershake, with the fingering indication 2 referring to the lower-auxiliary note in the grace and implying a lower-note start. The single stroke on the following note, e", may indicate a slide, beginning on c" with second finger. The progression across the bar, therefore, would involve logical fingering: from right-hand 3 on d" to 2 on c". Another possibility is that the single stroke indicates a forefall, right-hand 3 playing the grace, and the preceding double stroke indicates a shake involving upper-note alternation, right-hand 2 playing the graced note. The fingering sequence in the left-hand part in bars 2-3 suggests that 2 on f#" and 1 on g' may in each case refer to the upper-auxiliary note in the implied shake, and may underline an upper-note start to each

¹⁴See fols. 2v, 3, 3v, 7, 12v, 13, and 92v.

¹⁵In Byrd's *The Woods so Wild*, for instance, unusual superscript positioning of the double-stroke sign at the beginning of var. 8, given in both Add. 30485 and *Forster*, possibly indicates that the implied grace should begin on the upper-auxiliary note.

grace. This approach, providing a logical realisation of the grace signs, would make sense of the fingering.

9. *For Edward*/ Tomkins
GB-Ob Mus. Sch. C 93, fol. 80
 (MB v, no. 74, bars 1-3)



With reference to Example 10, the fingering given in the first bar of Forster's version seems odd. The indication, right-hand 2, on the note graced with the single stroke could be a copying error. If, however, the implied realisation of this single stroke is a slide (a reasonable assumption) and the fingering refers to the auxiliary note on which the grace would commence, the fourth finger would fall on the main note. In support of this interpretation it should be noted that right-hand 4 is in fact frequently associated with notes graced with the single stroke. A literal reading of the fingering given in this passage in *Forster's Virginal Book* would cause some awkwardness. It is possible that the indication on each of the graced notes arrowed refers to an auxiliary note in the implied grace; that is to say, in each case a shake involving upper-note alternation may be implied, the fingering referring to the upper-auxiliary note and underlining an upper-note start to the grace. With reference to the first graced note arrowed, the fingering indication given in the version recorded in the Paris manuscript might be interpreted as evidence to support the conjectured meaning of Forster's fingering. Both Forster's version of this piece and the *Prelude* by Tomkins referred to above contain detailed fingering. The fact that the pieces probably were fingered for teaching purposes might explain the need for clarification of the meaning of grace signs.

10. *Why ask you* [Bull], bars 9-12

a: *Forster* p.141

b: *Pn Rés.* 1186 bisII p.1

Example 10 shows two staves of music. Staff (a) is from *Forster* p.141 and staff (b) is from *Pn Rés.* 1186 bisII p.1. Both staves show the same musical passage for bars 9-12 of *Why ask you* by Bull. The notation includes treble clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes. Fingering numbers (1-5) are written below the notes. Three downward arrows point to specific notes in each staff, indicating grace notes. In staff (a), the arrows point to the first, third, and fifth notes. In staff (b), the arrows point to the first, third, and fifth notes as well.

Passages in Bull's *Vaulting Gailliard* are heavily fingered in one of the source-readings (*GB-Lbl* Add. 36661). In the extract quoted as Example 11 the consistent placing of right-hand 3 on notes graced with the double stroke makes the fingering sequence look decidedly awkward. There is a suggestion here too that the indications accompanying at least some of the graced notes (particularly those arrowed) refer to the upper-auxiliary note in each case and possibly imply an upper-auxiliary start to each grace. This interpretation would certainly make the passage more easily playable (and in performance I find it most natural to begin all the implied shakes on the upper-auxiliary note with the fingering indicated).

11. *Vaulting Gailliard*/ Bull
GB-Lbl, Add. 36661, fol. 50v
(MB xix, no. 90, bars 13-15)

Example 11 shows two staves of music. The top staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature. It contains a sequence of eighth and sixteenth notes. Fingering numbers (1-5) are written below the notes. Four downward arrows point to specific notes, indicating grace notes. The bottom staff continues the sequence with similar notation and fingering. The key signature changes to two sharps (F# and C#) in the final measure of the bottom staff.

12. *The Woods so Wild*/ Byrd
Forster, p. 126, bars 102-3



This question of fingering qualifying the meaning of grace signs as suggested is a difficult one to resolve. Nevertheless, where fingering appears to be illogical, clearly it is a factor which should be taken into consideration. Indeed, given that the virginalists' vocabulary of grace signs was limited, and that other means of qualification/clarification were employed, the evidence of fingering serving as a useful expedient is persuasive.

Even though a number of sixteenth-century continental treatises include discussions of keyboard fingering, the earliest English comment on fingering, in a mid seventeenth-century source, is a cautionary one: "... as for the true fingering . . . it cannot be set down in words."¹⁶ John Playford was possibly acknowledging the difficulty in describing the many possible approaches. Santa María's list of fingerings, which relate to the performance of contemporary Spanish keyboard music, is extensive. Yet he adds: "often the fingers are mixed in many other ways, for which no rules can be established, since [there] are so many."¹⁷ This statement is just as relevant to the English approach; the virginalist source fingerings provide evidence of a highly developed keyboard technique, and the extent of the surviving markings repays careful study.

¹⁶*Musick's Hand-maide* (London, 1663), *Lbl* K. 1. C. 1 [Preface].

¹⁷*Arte*, fol. 41; translation from *Jacobs* (1962), 217.